

## *Wisconsin Folks: Masters of Tradition*



Tani Diakite was born in 1976 in the Wassoulou region of southwestern Mali. This region is well known for music from n'gonis, a type of lute or harp. These instruments are probable ancestors of the American banjo.

Tani started learning about n'gonis when he was five years old from his father, who had learned from his father. The more traditional n'goni is the donso n'goni, or "hunter's lute." It has six strings and is used by hunters as a means of relaxation, of joining community celebrations and of marking rites of passage.

Thirty years ago, some Malian musicians adapted the more donso n'goni, making a new instrument with anywhere from 8-14 strings and played in a different style and for different purposes. This is the kamele n'goni, the instrument Tani makes and plays. Tani makes them from a round calabash which has its top quarter sliced off and inside hollowed out. He prepares a long bamboo neck to insert into the body of the instrument. He stretches a goat skin over the open area of the gourd and tacks it in place. He builds and inserts a bridge to support the strings. Multiple tunings are possible with the strings using a pentatonic scale. He plays the instrument by plucking the strings.

Tani took on an apprentice because he wanted someone else in the Madison area to have the knowledge of the instrument that he has. Mustapha Bobson Donda of Madison learned how to construct, tune and play the eight-string kamele n'goni he made.

Tani is dedicated to making music for himself and others. He performs regularly as Tani Diakite and the Malian Blues Band. Music helps him forget about any problems and he sees that happen with others too. Tani loves to see people become happy through the music; that moment when people change is very important to him. He starts to think about what else he can do to understand people, make them happy, and make them strong.

*"The kamele n'goni lets me connect with people. We all become friends through music." Tani Diakite*